

# *Why Practice Philosophy As A Way of Life?*

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***Note: this is not the final version of this paper. For that, please see the official version at [Metaphilosophy](#).***

Abstract: In this paper, I explain why there are good reasons to practice philosophy as a way of life. My argument begins with the assumptions that we should live well and yet that our understandings of how to live well can be mistaken. Philosophical reason and reflection can help correct these mistakes. Nonetheless, the evidence suggests that philosophical reasoning often fails to change our dispositions and behavior. Drawing on the work of Pierre Hadot, I claim that spiritual exercises and communal engagement mitigate the factors that prevent us from living in accordance with our conceptions of the good life. So, many of us have reasons to engage in philosophical reasoning along with behavioral, cognitive, and social strategies to alter our behavior and attitudes so that they're in line with our philosophical commitments. In these respects, many of us should practice philosophy as a way of life.

Keywords: ethics, metaphilosophy, philosophy as a way of life, Pierre Hadot, practical philosophy

## **1. Introduction**

Many ancient philosophers thought that philosophy was a way of life. They believed that philosophy should improve and transform our existence. In his influential work on ancient

philosophy, Pierre Hadot observes that, while ancient philosophers engaged in theoretical discourse, they also sought to integrate their doctrines into their ordinary lives (Hadot 1995).<sup>1</sup> Ancient philosophers engaged in spiritual exercises in order to change their attitudes and behavior. Different schools of philosophy favored different exercises. But common spiritual exercises included meditation, dialogue with others, negative and positive visualization, ascetic living, contemplating our lives from the perspective of the cosmos, subjecting negative patterns of thought to critique, and more. Philosophers sought out communities of like-minded people to assist them in self-transformation. Stoics, Epicureans, and others formed schools and communities to support one another. Philosophy as a way of life was hardly the exclusive preserve of Greek and Roman thinkers. Non-western philosophical traditions, such as Buddhism and Confucianism, were guides to living as well.<sup>2</sup>

In contrast to ancient thinkers, few contemporary academic philosophers study philosophy as a way of life. Contemporary philosophers tend to focus on puzzles and problems, such as the mind-body problem, the problem of free will, the correct analysis of conditionals, how we can acquire knowledge of moral and mathematical truths, and so on. Yet there's growing interest in philosophy as a guide to life. That's true outside of academia. Consider Stoicism. There's a vibrant Stoic movement replete with organizations, conferences, workshops, and bestselling books. Eastern philosophies, such as Buddhism, are ever more popular in the West. Aspects of Buddhism, such as mindfulness meditation, are pervasive. Academics are becoming

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<sup>1</sup> But for criticisms of Hadot's depiction of ancient philosophy, see Cooper 2013.

<sup>2</sup> And, of course, Buddhism and Confucianism, along with other Eastern philosophical traditions, are alive and well today.

more interested in philosophy as a way of life as well. There are initiatives underway to make it a more mainstream component of academic philosophy.<sup>3</sup>

Why should we practice philosophy as a way of life? Some may find the answer to this question easy to answer. Isn't it obvious that philosophy should guide life? After all, that's why many of us became interested in philosophy in the first place. Maybe it's *so* obvious that philosophy should guide life that it's not worth discussing. But, if it's that obvious, then it's hard to explain the limited interest in philosophy as a way of life among contemporary philosophers. On the other hand, some people consider philosophy as a way of life to be obsolete. Advice on how to live is best left to positive psychologists who study which interventions actually improve well-being. What's left for philosophers to do?

I'll explain why we have good reasons to practice philosophy as a way of life in this paper. My aim is not to defend a particular philosophy of life. Instead, I want to give a general argument in favor of practicing philosophy as a way of life. I'll discuss what I mean by "philosophy as a way of life" more precisely below. But, provisionally, philosophy as a way of life involves both philosophical reasoning and reflection about how we should live combined with behavioral, cognitive, and social strategies to alter our behavior and attitudes so that they're in line with our philosophical commitments. I'll argue that many of us have a reason to pursue philosophy as a way of life in this sense.

## **2. A Defense of Philosophical Discourse**

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<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, the "Philosophy As A Way of Life" Initiative at: <https://philife.nd.edu/>

My argument begins with the assumption that we should live well. By this, I mean at a minimum that we should do what contributes to our own good and fulfills our obligations. I don't have much to say in defense of this assumption. I take it for granted that we should promote our own good and avoid wrongdoing. You could deny this premise. But I suspect that most readers will share it. Some philosophers reject the view that there are any reasons that are independent of our thoughts and attitudes. Yet even these philosophers can agree that we have subjective reasons to improve our lives and meet our obligations to ourselves and others (Streumer 2017).

I'm also going to try to avoid committing myself to substantive views about prudence or the content of our obligations. Sure enough, I'll give examples that *assume* substantive views about what makes life go well and what's morally right. But these are only illustrations. I'm not committed to the views that these examples presuppose. My argument is compatible with different views about prudence and morality.

So, we should live well. Yet we can live badly. One way in which we can live badly is that our goals in life can be mistaken and our understanding of our obligations can be wrong. Furthermore, philosophical reasoning can help us to identify these mistakes. Here's an illustration. In the early 1970s, a young graduate student named Peter Singer decided to become a vegetarian (Singer 2009, 15-19). Singer was having lunch with a fellow graduate student named Richard Keshen. The choice was between spaghetti and salad. Keshen asked whether the spaghetti's sauce had meat in it. When he discovered it did, he chose the salad. Singer asked Keshen why he didn't eat meat. Keshen told Singer that he objected to the way that humans treated animals. Intrigued by Keshen's argument, Singer was put in touch with other vegetarian graduate students and intellectuals.

Their influence and Singer's own reflections led him conclude that our treatment of animals was wrong and that it's immoral to eat meat. But Singer was reluctant to act on this judgment. Singer and his wife Renata were not "animal lovers." Moreover, Singer liked meat and "vegetarians were very rare then, and most people thought them decidedly odd." Singer was tempted to shrug his shoulders and ignore the conclusion of his own arguments. But eventually the Singers became vegetarians. Singer comments: "It seemed especially contradictory to take a theoretical interest in ethics and yet push its conclusions to one side when they became difficult to act upon" (2009, 18).

The point of this example is to illustrate how mistaken we can be about how well our lives are going, and whether our conduct is permissible. Singer identified a mistake in how he was living his life. But how do we identify these kind of mistakes? How do we know if we're living badly? We need reasoning and reflection to identify our mistakes. Much of this corrective reasoning is instrumental. Perhaps you have certain goals and you're failing to effectively pursue them. Maybe you want to be happy, but your lifestyle results in unhappiness. You can use reasoning to discover this and correct your behavior. Yet we can also be mistaken in more fundamental ways. Our deeper aims can be defective and our understanding of our obligations can be wrong. Philosophical reasoning can help us to identify and correct these mistakes. For instance, philosophical reasoning influenced Singer to condemn the treatment of animals. The philosopher Roslind Godlovitch was writing an article on animal ethics, and Singer gave Godlovitch feedback on it. Singer says: "In the process of putting her arguments in what seemed to me the strongest possible form...I convinced myself that the case for vegetarianism...was overwhelming" (2009, 17).

Philosophical reasoning can also identify mistakes in our prudential aims. Philosophical reflection can even unseat foundational assumptions about prudence. Here's another illustration. Buddhist philosophers argue that the belief in the self is the root cause of human suffering. We cling to our desires and projects because we believe that we are enduring selves. Yet our projects and pursuits are fragile. Bad luck can put an end to our projects in an instant. It's true that we can achieve happiness and pleasure on occasion. But, according to a Buddhist simile, the pursuit of worldly pleasures is like licking honey from a razor blade (Perrett 2016, 37). Each of us faces the inevitable loss of everyone and everything that we love.<sup>4</sup> The passage of time and death will rob us of much of what we value. The realization that our lives are fragile and our egoistic pursuits are in a sense futile may cause us to feel existential anxiety and suffering.

Yet Buddhist philosophers contend that egoistic pursuits and the existential anxiety that they provoke rest on a mistake. The suffering that we experience is predicated on the belief that we are enduring selves with projects, plans, and meaningful goals that require an open future.<sup>5</sup> But there are no selves. Why believe that there are no selves? Some Buddhists argue that we lack introspective evidence that there is a self and, in addition, it's unnecessary to posit a self in order to explain our experience. Others defend a brand of mereological reductionism according to which entities with composite parts, such as the self, are unreal. Some philosophers, such as Derek Parfit, use thought experiments to claim that our ordinary conception of the self is unjustified (Parfit 1986). I won't discuss the arguments against the enduring self here. My point

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<sup>4</sup> I borrow this poignant formulation of the Buddha's First Noble Truth from Sharon Street (2016).

<sup>5</sup> This interpretation of Buddhist philosophy draws heavily on Siderits 2016.

is this: if these arguments are sound, they may cause us to change our attitudes and beliefs about our lives.

According to Buddhists, we should fetishize our projects and attachments less and end our grasping and clinging to life. We should live in the moment more, as dispelling the illusion of self means that we should stop clinging to our desires and projects and worrying about their fulfillment. We can suffer from existential anxiety because we worry that our lives are meaningless, but, if there is no self, then there is no subject whose life can lack meaning in the first place (Siderits 2007, 77). We should also care about the suffering of others more. The badness of suffering doesn't depend on whether this suffering is mine, as it's false that suffering belongs to any self.<sup>6</sup> So, suffering ought to be reduced wherever it occurs. More generally, the case against the self should arguably transform our relationship with our own projects and the lives of others.

These examples illustrate how philosophical reasoning and reflection can lead us to change our understanding of our obligations and aims in life. But what exactly is “philosophical reasoning”? It would likely be futile to come up with a precise definition of this concept. For one thing, I doubt that there's a category of philosophical reason that would make it distinct from other kinds of reasoning. I'm also skeptical that I could come up with a definition of philosophy that could cover much of what philosophers do. So, I won't try. Instead, I'll stipulate that *one*

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<sup>6</sup> This is one interpretation of Śāntideva's famous “ownerless suffering” argument for altruism in the *Bodhisattvacaryāvatāra* (Garfield, Jenkins, and Priest 2016). But it's controversial whether Śāntideva was offering an argument for the rationality of altruism or instead a guide to meditative practice.

kind of philosophical reasoning is reasoning and reflection on what our aims in life should be and the content of our moral obligations. And, by this, I don't mean something especially rarefied. As I understand it, philosophical reasoning is continuous with ordinary reasoning about our obligations and life goals, although it tends to be more systematic and abstract.<sup>7</sup> I make no other claims about where the boundaries of philosophy lie or what distinguishes it from other kinds of reasoning.

One of my major claims so far is that philosophy can cause us to change our views about what we should seek in life and what's right and wrong. But that's not enough for my argument to work. Remember that my aim is not to show that philosophy can change our beliefs. My aim is to show that we have reason to use philosophical reasoning to guide our lives. For that claim to be true, philosophy needs to be reliable. Suppose that philosophy changes our minds, but always in the wrong direction. Instead of getting us closer to the truth about morality and prudence, philosophy lead us further away. If that were the case, then philosophy would be unreliable. And it would be a bad thing if we changed our lives on the basis of an unreliable method. Suppose that my doctor is unreliable. If I took her advice, this would make my health worse. Obviously, I should avoid listening to my doctor. Similarly, if philosophy delivers up bad advice about how I should live my life, then I should ignore it.

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<sup>7</sup> Toby Svoboda writes that rational, philosophical reflection on the good life “will include argumentation, appeals to coherence, reasoned objections to competing views, and other devices familiar to philosophers—it presumably will not include dogmatic appeals to divine revelation, historical authorities, or prevailing social norms” (2016, 41-2). I agree.



The question of whether philosophy is reliable or not is itself a philosophical question. Some philosophers deny that philosophy can help us reach the truth, while others argue that philosophy is reliable after all (Brennan 2010). I'm unable to resolve this disagreement here. But my argument relies on fairly modest premises about the reliability of philosophy. My view is that philosophy can alter our credences in a reliable way. By "credences," I mean how likely you think a belief is to be true. We can be more-or-less confident that something is true. For instance, I'm only weakly confident that the current President of the United States will win reelection. There's a reasonable chance that another candidate will win. We can also understand our philosophical beliefs in terms of credences. Philosophical reasoning can move our credences. Philosophy can lead us to rationally conclude that certain philosophical views are more likely to be true, even if philosophical reasoning is often insufficiently powerful to make us confident that we've arrived at the truth. In this sense, philosophical reasoning can be weakly reliable.

Before Singer encountered the arguments for vegetarianism, he likely attached a high credence to the belief that eating meat is morally acceptable. For the sake of illustration, let's imagine that Singer would have said that it's more likely than not that eating meat is morally acceptable before hearing the case for vegetarianism. But, after listening to and evaluating the arguments against meat-eating, Singer revised his credences. At some point, Singer concluded that vegetarianism was more likely justified. It's hard to deny that philosophical arguments can rationally move our credences in this fashion. At first glance, good philosophical arguments can shift our views about which positions are more probable or less probable.

Let's consider my example of the Buddhist view on the self. Before reading Buddhist philosophers and fellow travelers, I had a high credence in the "further fact" view, the view that we are enduring selves and that our identities are irreducible to psychological connectedness and

continuity. After hearing and considering arguments against this view and in favor of a reductionist conception of the self, I adjusted my credences. I now place a higher credence in the reductionist view after hearing these arguments. Maybe I'm still not fully convinced. But I now believe that the reductionist view is more probable than I once thought. My claim is that it's rational to adjust one's credences about the plausibility of a philosophical position in light of strong philosophical arguments.

If it's possible for philosophical reasoning and reflection to move our credences in a rational way, then philosophy can be reliable in a sense. I see no reason why philosophical reflection would only be reliable about the topics that I've discussed. So, it stands to reason that philosophical reasoning can potentially be reliable in other cases too. It's true that philosophical arguments rarely command agreement. The philosophical community notoriously fails to reach consensus on which philosophical views are correct. Nonetheless, this observation is compatible with my argument. Philosophical arguments can lead us to rationally adjust our credences even though philosophers will continue to disagree about which views are best justified overall. But arguments that prompt rational belief revision can help guide our lives despite the fact that they fall short of generating consensus. For instance, when Singer adjusted his credences about the truth of vegetarianism, this led him to stop eating meat. The fact that other philosophers disagreed with him seems irrelevant.

To be clear, it would be absurd to claim that philosophical reasoning is reliable *per se*. Philosophical arguments can easily point us away from the truth as well. Philosophical reasoning is more likely to be reliable if the reasoner has other epistemic virtues, such as humility, fair-mindedness, and intellectual curiosity. But that holds true for all reasoning. Scientific reasoning can go astray if the reasoner in question lacks epistemic virtues. There are also no guarantees.

Even a scrupulous and fair reasoner can reach the wrong conclusion. Nonetheless, it's plausible that philosophical reasoning can be weakly reliable under the right conditions.

### **3. From Philosophical Discourse to Philosophy as a Way of Life**

#### *The Problem of Philosophy's Inefficacy*

So, philosophical reasoning can help us better understand how we should live. But understanding is insufficient. We must be able to use this understanding to inform our lives.

Recall that, when Singer first came to believe that vegetarianism was morally required, he was reluctant to stop eating meat. To support his reluctance, Singer gave an analogy between vegetarianism and poverty relief. Singer reasoned that he was also required to spend more money on helping the global poor. Yet he didn't do this. Singer asked: "If we can live in the knowledge that we are not doing what we ought to be doing with starvation in India, why can't we live with the knowledge that we are not doing the right thing about eating animals?" (Singer 2009, 17). Singer's wife, Renata, was not impressed with this argument. Renata insisted that, in addition to becoming vegetarians, they also give more to famine relief. Singer relented.

But let's suppose that Singer had failed to reform his behavior. That would have been a mistake. That is, Singer would be making a mistake if philosophical reasoning revealed a better way to live and he nonetheless failed to adjust his behavior in light of this knowledge. Here's a plausible principle that could explain these judgments: if you should live well, you have a justified belief that you are living badly in some respect, and you have a justified belief that some other way of living is better, then you have a strong reason to change the way that you live to conform to the way of life that's better. This principle implies that Singer had reason to change his life.

Yet most of us refrain from changing our lives on the basis of philosophical reasoning. We reason ourselves to some conclusion about how to live and yet we refrain from adjusting our behavior and attitudes in light of this conclusion. One source of evidence for these claims comes from the behaviors and beliefs of ethicists. In a series of provocative studies, Eric Schwitzgebel and Joshua Rust (2014; 2016) have examined the moral behavior of moral philosophers through both self-reports and direct behavioral measures. They've found that the behavior of professional ethicists is not significantly different from the behavior of other philosophers or academics. Sure enough, the *beliefs* of professional ethicists are different from those of other academics. But those views fail to translate into action.

According to Schwitzgebel and Rust's survey, most ethicists agree that eating mammals is morally problematic (2014, 306-7). Sixty percent of surveyed ethicists say that "regularly eating the meat of mammals, such as beef or pork" is morally bad (ethicists were much more likely to view this behavior as bad than other groups). Ethicists were also more likely to say that they are vegetarians than other philosophers and college professors. Despite their disapproval of meat-eating, ethicists reported eating meat at about the same rate as did other groups. Nearly nine out of ten ethicists also say that it is a good thing to give ten percent of your income to charity, which is a higher rate than non-ethicists. Nonetheless, ethicists did not give significantly more of their incomes to charity than did non-philosophers (Schwitzgebel and Rust 2014, 314).

Other researchers have replicated Schwitzgebel and Rust's findings. Philipp Schönegger and Johannes Wagner (2019) have surveyed ethicists in German-speaking countries. They found that ethicists did have different moral beliefs than non-philosophers: they were both more stringent on some measures (charitable giving) and less stringent on others (keeping in touch

with your mother). But, once again, ethicists did not report more moral behavior than non-ethicists in general.<sup>8</sup>

We should interpret these findings with caution. Surveys can be unreliable, especially when researchers are asking about conduct that could cast the respondents in an unflattering light. Perhaps some of the surveyed groups are more likely to misreport their behavior or beliefs. For this reason, we're unable to rule out the possibility that ethicists do in fact behave differently than other academics. However, Schwitzgebel and Rust do provide observable measures of ethical behavior. For instance, Schwitzgebel and Rust (2014) examine how often ethicists vote from publicly available data, whether ethicists are more likely to respond to charitable incentives to complete their surveys, pay conference registration fees, and other measures. Once again, they find that the behavior of ethicists does not differ from other groups.

The evidence from surveys of ethicists is consistent with the hypothesis that engagement with philosophy can change beliefs. Professional ethicists have different beliefs than other philosophers and non-philosophers. Perhaps we can explain this via selection. People who already are disposed to favor vegetarianism and charitable giving may disproportionately decide to become ethicists. But it also seems plausible that philosophical reflection and reasoning is partially causally responsible for the difference between ethicists and other groups.

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<sup>8</sup> Schönegger and Wagner do find that professional ethicists are more likely to be vegetarians. However, Schwitzgebel suggests that some of the respondents in Schönegger and Wagner's study are giving inaccurate self-reports and that different statistical techniques may eliminate the difference between ethicists and non-ethicists. See Schwitzgebel 2019.

Yet the scope of philosophy's impact appears to be limited. If philosophical reasoning significantly influenced behavior, we would expect philosophical reasoning and reflection to change the ethical behavior of the people who engage in this reasoning. But their behavior doesn't differ from the behavior of the control groups. This is evidence that philosophical reasoning has few effects on behavior on average. Research on the gap between the beliefs and actions of philosophers fits into a broader empirical literature on the "value-action" gap (see, for example, Flynn, Bellaby, and Ricci 2009). According to this literature, we often express value judgments and attitudes that are at odds with our behavior. People say that they value environmentally friendly products, but they end up buying whatever product is cheapest or most convenient. Recent research on the value-action gap suggests that people have trouble translating abstract values into specific behaviors. Similarly, while philosophical reasoning might change abstract values and beliefs, the gap between values and behavior remains about as wide as ever.

Other strands of evidence support the claim that moral reasoning fails to influence behavior or attitudes. A small empirical literature examines the impact that ethics classes have on the moral attitudes, judgments, and behavior of students. This literature generally finds that ethics instruction has, at best, modest effects on outcomes (Schwitzgebel 2013). One study examined the impact of an ethics course in the philosophy department on perceptions of fairness (Konow 2017). This research concludes that ethics instruction had no impacts on students' judgments of fairness. Only a handful of studies have examined whether ethics instruction changed the behavior of students outside of a laboratory. These studies generally find no effect. To illustrate, several studies consider whether business ethics instruction affects rates of cheating, and these studies find that there are minimal difference between the control and the treatment groups on average (Konow 2017, 191-3).

Why does abstract moral reasoning seem to have little impact on attitudes or behavior? I'll explore this question in more detail in the following subsection. But one possibility is rationalization. Perhaps people who engage in philosophical reasoning end up justifying their prior beliefs and conduct. People adopt whatever ethical and philosophical views that ratify their past behavior and judgments. While the rationalization view likely explains the limited impact of philosophical reasoning in part, it's hard to square with the discrepancy between ethicists' judgments and behavior. Many ethicists agree that they should give more to charity and go vegetarian, but they don't do these things. Another possibility is what Schwitzgebel and Rust call the "inert discovery view" (2014, 295-296). On this view, philosophical reasoning and reflection does lead to the discovery of moral truths and yet this doesn't cause a corresponding change in behavior. The inert discovery view is consistent with my background assumptions. I've argued that abstract moral and philosophical reasoning can be reliable at least in the weak sense that it can cause us to rationally revise our credences. So, it's possible that people who engage in more moral reasoning have better justified ethical views than other groups. Yet, for whatever reason, this moral reasoning falls short of causing behavioral changes.

### *Philosophy As A Way of Life As A Potential Solution*

Suppose that you agree that philosophy's inefficacy is sometimes a problem. How can we mitigate this problem? Let's return to the question of why philosophical reasoning fails to cause attitudinal or behavioral change. Consider a simplistic model of how people could change their lives. Imagine that you engage in reasoning and you arrive at the conclusion that you ought to X and you respond to this judgment by doing X. More concretely, suppose that I conclude on the basis of moral reasoning that I ought to become a vegetarian and give more to effective charities

and, as a result, I change my life so that I become a vegetarian and give more to charity. On a purely rationalist model of personal change, a reasoned judgment that I ought to do X would be sufficient to cause me to X.

However, a simple rationalist model of personal change faces four key problems:

- (i) *The Problem of Knowledge.* I may lack knowledge about how to change my life in light of my judgments. An illustration: maybe I don't know how to cook vegetarian meals or might not know where to best donate my money. Even if I believe in the abstract that I should go vegetarian, I lack the knowledge to concretely apply this conclusion to my day-to-day life.
- (ii) *The Problem of Motivation.* The simple rationalist model overlooks the problem of motivation. I might lack the motivation to make my behavior consistent with my judgments. After reading Peter Singer's famous arguments for charitable giving, some of my students agree that they should give much more to charity. Yet few do. Why? Although they agree on a theoretical level that they should give to effective charities, my students still lack the motivation to give away their money. Their reasoned judgments fail to motivate them.
- (iii) *The Problem of Context.* The simple rationalist model ignores the importance of context. It seems undeniable that our behavior is influenced by the situation we find ourselves in. Cues in our environment trigger judgments and behaviors. Social cues are especially important. If other people are behaving in a certain way, most of are strongly inclined to go along with the crowd. Few of us enjoy being the oddball.
- (iv) *The Problem of Habits.* Much of our decision-making and behavior is automatic and the product of habit rather than explicit reasoning. So, to change our behavior in an



enduring way, we need to cultivate new habits. Here's a common problem: you should exercise more, but you consistently don't. Why? One reason is probably that you haven't cultivated the habit of exercising. Thus, you need to motivate yourself to exercise in any given case, which is difficult to do. If you had acquired the habit of exercising, the decision to exercise would become more seamless and automatic.

These four reasons are interrelated. You could lack the motivation to change your behavior because you lack the right kind of social cues and incentives in your environment to motivate this behavior. Moreover, these four factors help explain why abstract reasoning fails to translate into action. While we may believe on the basis of abstract reasoning that we ought to behave differently, factors (i-iv) prevent us from consistently acting on this belief. So, to align our behavior and attitudes with our philosophical commitments, we need a solution that addresses (i-iv).

Here's a motivated hypothesis: philosophy as a way of life is a potential solution to philosophy's inefficacy because it addresses problems (i-iv). Let me start by clarifying what I mean by "philosophy as a way of life." As I use the phrase, philosophy as a way of life includes philosophical reflection on how to live combined with strategies for living in accordance with our convictions about the good life. To flesh this idea out, I'll draw heavily on the pioneering work of Pierre Hadot (1995; 2004). Hadot argues that ancient philosophers realized that reason and philosophical discourse has limits. To be a true philosopher, you needed to do more than engage in philosophical reasoning. You also must live philosophically. A true philosopher integrated philosophy into one's life. Epictetus illustrated this insight as follows: "a carpenter does not come up to you and say 'listen to me discourse about the art of carpentry' but he makes a contract for a house and he builds it...Do the same thing for yourself" (Hadot 1995, 267).

How did ancient philosophers integrate philosophy into their lives? Hadot identifies several strategies, but he emphasizes “spiritual exercises.” Spiritual exercises are practices that seek to make us into the kind of being that our chosen philosophy endorses (Hadot 2004, 6; May 2017, 171). Ancient philosophers advocated spiritual exercises such as meditation, dietary regimens, physical exercise, gratitude exercises, and other strategies. Spiritual practices are intended to be repeated routines rather than one-off actions or realizations. According to many ancient philosophers, we should frequently engage in spiritual exercises in order to gradually modify our dispositions and mental habits in the desired direction.

Here’s an illustration. Many Stoics believed that, to achieve tranquility and virtue, we should focus only on what we can control and rid ourselves of desire to change things that exist outside of our control, such as the inevitable misfortunes of life. Events outside of our control are indifferent to us and we must train ourselves to respond to these events with equanimity. To internalize this lesson, Stoics practiced negative visualization, which requires practitioners to vividly imagine painful or tragic outcomes (the Romans referred to this technique as *premeditatio malorum*, the premeditation of evils). Seneca advises us to “remind our spirits all the time that they love things that will leave—no, better, things that are already leaving” (2015, 47). Along similar lines, Epictetus tells that, when kissing your child, you should imagine that he or she will die tomorrow (2014, 207). Stoics believed that negative visualization was a useful tool for preparing us for events outside our control and for instilling gratitude for the goods that we possess. Negative visualization was just one in a repertoire of Stoic spiritual exercises. Other Stoic exercises included regular practice in subjecting our reactions and impressions to rational critique, meditation on the cosmos, and reflecting on the impermanence of all things.

Eastern philosophical traditions pioneered their own distinctive spiritual exercises. The most famous is the practice of mindfulness meditation in the Buddhist tradition. The Buddha recommends meditation and breathing exercises in order to cultivate insight into the nature of reality and liberate ourselves from clinging. One aspect of the Buddha's teaching seems to be that concentration through meditation can lead us to see that all possible candidates for the self are impermanent and thus unable to serve as the basis for a self.<sup>9</sup> In this way, meditation can help us to confirm that the self is an illusion. Furthermore, meditation and breathing exercises can cultivate habits that counter emotions that reinforce the sense of "I"—that is, the sense that we have selves. Loving-kindness meditation is one meditative practice that aims to counter emotions, such as greed, that prioritize and reify our self-interest. Loving-kindness meditation involves extending compassion towards ourselves, our associates, our enemies, and a progressively larger circle of beings. Through this practice, we can reinforce habits that calm and overcome egocentric emotions. This is one step on the path to internalizing the truth of non-self.

Spiritual exercises can help us to apply philosophy to our lives. Recall that one of the factors that explain why abstract values fail to translate into action is the problem of habits. Habits are cognitive and behavioral dispositions that tend to rely more on unconscious and automatic decision-making. Habits are sticky. Once you cultivate a set of habits, it's hard to change the structure of your life. Spiritual exercises aim to change habits. These exercises cultivate new cognitive and affective dispositions to replace old habits. Stoic practices seek to reform our habits of fixating on and worrying about events that are outside of our control.

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<sup>9</sup> Hence the Buddha says: "Develop meditation on the perception of impermanence; for when you [do so] the conceit 'I am' will be abandoned" (Nanamoli and Bodhi 1995, 424).

Buddhist serenity meditation undermines our habits of clinging to our thoughts and desires, and soothes the turmoil in our minds. Loving-kindness meditation weakens our tendency to react with feelings of hatred, anger, and other egocentric emotions, and instead promotes compassion and empathy for all other beings. By restructuring our habits, spiritual exercises change how to act and think about the world. They may also address the problem of motivation. For example, one goal of loving-kindness meditation is to help motivate you to act with compassion towards all suffering beings.

But do spiritual exercises work? It's not enough to seek to change our habits and motivations. We must provide evidence that spiritual exercises do have this effect. This is not the place to provide a comprehensive review of the evidence. However, there's now a large literature in psychology that supports the claim that certain spiritual practices can change our attitudes, dispositions, and behavior. Stoic spiritual exercises bear close affinities with modern cognitive behavioral therapy. Similar to Stoic advice, cognitive behavioral therapy directs people to challenge mental distortions and disrupt negative patterns of thought. Cognitive behavioral therapy is one of the most well-supported strategies for treating depression, anxiety, and other mental health problems (Hofmann et al. 2012). This therapy appears to have real behavioral consequences as well—for instance, cognitive behavioral therapy reduces violence and crime among treated populations (Heller et al. 2016; Blattman, Jamison, and Sheridan 2017). Psychologists have also begun studying mindfulness meditation in recent decades. While researchers continue to debate the effects of mindfulness meditation, there is evidence that this practice can change our cognitive and behavioral dispositions (Goleman and Davidson 2017).

Another component of philosophy as a way of life that Hadot identifies is communal engagement. Hadot remarks that ancient philosophy “was always a philosophy practiced in a

group” (2004, 274). This may help explain the proliferation of philosophical schools and communities in ancient Greece, from Plato’s academy to the garden of Epicurus. Ancient philosophers joined philosophical schools in order to create a community of research and mutual assistance. Extended networks of spiritual advisors, disciples, and supporters were also important. A community of like-minded adherents supported philosophy as a way of life in several ways. For one thing, this community could communicate the philosophical teachings and principles of their school.

The members of this community could also provide spiritual guidance and advice. For example, the Stoic Junius Rusticus was the spiritual advisor of the emperor Marcus Aurelius. According to one account, “[Marcus] received most instruction from Junius Rusticus, whom he ever revered and whose disciple he became, a man esteemed in both private and public life, and exceedingly well acquainted with the Stoic system...” (Magie 1921, 139). More generally, a community can preserve a tradition of thought on how to incorporate philosophical teachings into your life. A tradition in this sense may serve a repository of experience and wisdom that transcends the knowledge of any individual (Scheffler 2012). Remember that one problem philosophy as a way of life faces is the problem of knowledge. You can accept philosophical principles in the abstract and lack the right kind of knowledge to apply them to your life. A community of fellow-travelers can transmit a tradition of thought on how to live in accordance with philosophical teachings on a day-to-day basis.

Communal engagement also addresses the other problems we face when applying philosophy to life, such as the problem of motivation and context. Humans are an intensely social species. As a result, our motivations are often social. We tend to act as others around us do, and we’re motivated to behave in certain ways because people around us encourage this

behavior. We desire esteem from others and need to belong. People harm others in order to conform to their group, and also help others for the same reason (Nook et al. 2016).

So, a philosophical community can harness social motivations to change behavior and attitudes. Suppose that you want to adopt a new way of life. The fact that the other members of your community are trying to live this way can provide a powerful motivation for you to change as well. In addition, community helps solve the problem of context, the problem that much of our behavior is a response to cues in the environment instead of abstract, principled reasoning. Consider the importance of communal rituals. Communal rituals can serve as cues to engage in some activity that you may otherwise not engage in. When the members of a congregation pass around the collection plate at the same time every week, this serves as a cue to engage in charitable giving—something that you may neglect to do otherwise.

Consider a contemporary illustration of the power of community. Effective altruism is a social movement that aims to effectively make others better off through rigorous evidence and reasoning. In several respects, effective altruism is an example of philosophy as a way of life. Philosophical reasoning is an important part of effective altruism. Many of the people who helped found the movement, such as Peter Singer, Toby Ord, and Will MacAskill, are philosophers. Most effective altruists endorse consequentialist philosophical views and they're famous for arguing that we should give a substantial amount of our incomes to highly effective charities. Yet effective altruists acknowledge that there's a gap between moral reasoning and behavior. It's one thing to claim that we should make substantial sacrifices in order to improve the world, and another to make these sacrifices.

This is in part why effective altruists form communities. Effective altruists have created social clubs and chapters throughout the world. These chapters host events and discussion

groups. They're a way for effective altruists to support each other in their giving and projects. In addition, effective altruist podcasts, conferences, and discussion forums dispense moral advice and guidance on how to live according to effective altruist principles. Effective altruists also create commitment devices to encourage effective giving. For instance, Giving What We Can is an effective altruist organization. The goal of Giving What We Can is to create a supportive community for effective altruists and to leverage a commitment device and social pressure to encourage people to follow effective altruist principles. To join, you must publicly pledge to give ten percent of your lifetime income to highly effective charities. By taking the pledge, members become part of a community of like-minded people and they also promote their reputation and status, which encourages people to stick to the pledge (Giving What We Can 2019). In these ways, effective altruists use social motivations to encourage moral improvement.

I'll now bring the different strands of my argument together. My argument in this paper amounts to a defense of philosophy as a way of life. How? Philosophical reasoning is crucial because we're fallible. Our understandings of our obligations and aims in life can be mistaken. When used appropriately, philosophical reasoning can improve our understanding of how we should live. Yet we have trouble living according to abstract moral and philosophical principles. The evidence that I've surveyed suggests that there's a gulf between abstract reasoning and the philosophical life. This inconsistency can be a mistake. If philosophical reasoning is at least weakly reliable, then it can identify ways in which we can improve our lives in these cases. A failure to act on philosophical conclusions is sometimes a lost opportunity to live a better life.

Philosophy as a way of life can help bridge the gap. Drawing on the work of Hadot, I've discussed two strategies in particular: spiritual exercises and communal engagement. These strategies mitigate the factors that plausibly explain the gap between our philosophical

commitments and our dispositions and behaviors. Spiritual exercises modify our habits and motivations, and communal engagement can address the problem of knowledge, motivation, and contexts. If these practices aid us in living well or, at least, living more in accordance with justified beliefs about the good life, then we have reason to engage in them. There are likely other strategies besides these two that can assist us in living more coherent and perhaps better lives. I don't pretend that my account is comprehensive. My point is merely to establish that there are compelling reasons to pursue philosophy as a way life.

#### **4. Scope, Religion, the Value of Philosophy, and Other Clarifications**

In this section, I'll clarify my argument and respond to some objections.

One question about my argument involves its scope. I've sometimes implied that my argument has universalist pretensions. My argument begins with the assumption that we should live a good life. I then argued that, if this assumption is true, then there's good reason for us to practice philosophy as a way of life. But who exactly should practice philosophy as a way of life? Does my argument imply that *everyone* should practice philosophy as a way of life?

To answer this question, we should first note that philosophy as a way of life is not all-or-nothing. Philosophy as a way of life is instead a spectrum of behaviors and activities. Recall that philosophy as a way of life consists in philosophical reasoning and reflection on how you should live along with strategies for changing your attitudes, dispositions, and behaviors to conform to your philosophical commitments, particularly spiritual exercises and communal engagement. Most people partake in these activities to some extent. While the majority of humanity will never take a philosophy class, most people wonder whether their lives have meaning and value, and



whether they're living well. Most reflect on their goals in life and whether they're behaving morally, and occasionally adjust their attitudes and behavior in light of these reflections.

So, philosophy as a way of life is not necessarily a rarefied or elite activity. People often participate in it to some degree. And, if that's true, then it doesn't sound so strange to claim that most people have good reason to pursue philosophy as a way of life. It seems like a good thing for people to reflect and reason about their ends in life and try to make their behavior consistent with these ends. On a related note, consider religious ways of life. Religions incorporate the components of philosophy as a way of life that I've defended. Religions encourage spiritual exercises, such as prayer and meditation, and create communities to support norms of behavior. These practices aim to effect change among their adherents. Does a religious life therefore count as philosophy as a way of life? It can. If a religious life involves rational and philosophical reflection on the good life along with spiritual exercises and communal engagement, then a religious life counts as philosophy as a way of life in the sense that I've defined it. Some religious ways of life rely on dogmatic appeals to divine revelation and authority. To the extent that this is true, I'd resist classifying these as philosophy as a way of life. But other religious conceptions of the good life would match the description of philosophy as a way of life that I've given.<sup>10</sup>

Yet I feel that this concessive response to the concern about scope is somewhat inadequate. Most of the examples that I've used throughout this paper are not cases of people who occasionally reflect on whether their lives are good and change their behavior in light of

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<sup>10</sup> Hadot (1995) points out that some Christians in the ancient world conceived of Christianity as a philosophical way of life. See also: Löhr 2010.

these reflections. Instead, my examples are often of people, such as professional philosophers, who engage in systematic philosophical reasoning about ethics and the good life. Some of the cases that I've discussed include people who also make it a major focus of their lives to live in accordance with their philosophical conclusions. For ease of reference, I'll refer to a way of life that involves (i) regular and systematic philosophical reasoning and reflection on the good life, (ii) a sustained focus on integrating philosophical principles into one's life through spiritual exercises, communal engagement, and other strategies as *robust philosophy as a way of life*. Should people generally pursue robust philosophy as a way of life?

No. It seems false that everyone has an all-things-considered reason to pursue philosophy as a way of life in this more robust sense. A variety of mundane factors can defeat the reason to pursue this way of life. The most important one is opportunity costs. Engaging with philosophy takes time and effort. Most of us need philosophical training to assist us first. So, to engage in philosophical reasoning in a serious way, you need to forgo other options. And this tradeoff isn't worth it for everyone. Suppose you could spend more time reading philosophy papers or you could spend more time with your friends and family. Many people should take the latter option because that would make their lives better. This point generalizes: once we consider opportunity costs, it's false that most people should practice philosophy as a way of life in a robust way.

My point is that there's probably no general answer to the question "should people practice robust philosophy as a way of life?" This depends on a complex set of factors that vary across individuals. Some people lack the time, resources, and inclination to engage in philosophical activity. Other people lack the epistemic virtues that make philosophical reasoning and reflection more likely to be reliable and useful. Some people have more valuable things to do. My argument aims to show that we have a *reason*—potentially a strong one—to engage in

philosophy as a way of life. It doesn't aim to show that this reason is decisive in any particular case.

Yet this concessive response may still be too strong for some critics. I'm claiming that the life of someone who refrains from practicing philosophy as a way of life is in some respect deficient. For example, imagine that a person, Samantha, follows a traditional way of life inherited from her community. Samantha rarely or never reflects on whether these traditions are good ones, considers alternative ways of life, or engages in philosophical argumentation. But let's imagine that Samantha's life is a rich and happy one, filled with friends, family, and community. Can I really claim that this person's life is missing something valuable that philosophy could deliver?

I think so. The factor that makes Samantha's life worse in one respect is fallibility and risk. Samantha may be living badly in some way and not know it, and philosophical activity and practices could help correct her way of life. A happy and rich life isn't always good in all respects. Samantha may unknowingly be making serious moral mistakes in the course of living her life, where careful philosophical reasoning and reflection would uncover this mistake. Again, this possibility fails to imply that Samantha has an all-things-considered reason to pursue philosophy as a way of life. Perhaps the opportunity costs of pursuing philosophy as a way of life are too great. Maybe pursuing this would require Samantha to sacrifice projects that she's right to value. Nonetheless, that's compatible with the claim that Samantha has a reason, albeit a defeasible one, to practice philosophy as a way of life.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> There's a complex question about how to weigh the benefits and costs of philosophical activity against other options. For an insightful discussion, see MacAskill 2014, chap. 7.

Finally, let me consider another concern about the scope of my argument. How does philosophy as a way of life relate to the rest of philosophical activity? Epicurus wrote:

Vain is the word of a philosopher which does not heal any suffering of man. For just as there is no profit in medicine if it does not expel the diseases of the body, so there is no profit in philosophy either, if it does not expel the suffering of the mind (Irvine 2008, 4).

Like some other Hellenistic philosophers, Epicurus rejected the view that philosophy is a merely academic subject. The point of philosophical reasoning was to achieve the good life. On Epicurus' view, philosophical activities that are unrelated to this aim should be discouraged. Does my account imply a similar conclusion?

No. My claim is that we should live well and this means that we have some reason to pursue philosophy as a way of life. Yet I don't claim that the philosophy related to questions about the good life is the only kind of philosophy that's worthwhile. Perhaps we have good reason to learn the truth about philosophical questions because this knowledge is valuable in itself irrespective of any practical benefits that it offers. It's plausible that learning more about the nature of, say, consciousness, causation, or universals is worthwhile regardless of whether it makes my life better or not. A defense of philosophy as a way of life is compatible with pluralism about the aims of philosophy.

## **5. Conclusion**

I've tried to defend philosophy as a way of life in this paper. Let me conclude by saying something about why this defense could be valuable. Some readers will think that philosophy as a way of life sounds like amateur self-help advice. These readers may conclude that this subject is best left to positive psychologists who study well-being from a scientific perspective. Others

readers will likely find my argument in this paper to be banal. They'll take it as obvious that philosophy should guide life. I want to briefly respond to these concerns.

Philosophy as a way of life should integrate insights from psychology. We must understand how spiritual exercises and other techniques actually impact the people who use them, and how to translate abstract principles into real changes in our lives. We can't understand these issues merely by reflecting on them. Instead, we need rigorous empirical evidence to test whether our strategies achieve the aims that we seek. But questions about the good life have an irreducible normative component. The question "how should I live my life?" is not reducible to the question of how I can increase the amount of positive affect or perception of meaning in my life. Sometimes it's wrong to take certain actions to increase your happiness, sometimes your own happiness is the incorrect thing for you to value, and sometimes there's a gap between what I think is meaningful and what is actually meaningful. Insofar as that's true, it's false that positive psychology gives us a complete answer to the question of how we should live. It's always possible that my goals are mistaken or that my way of responding to others and world is wrong. Psychology is incapable of identifying more fundamental mistakes about what we ought to value and the content of our obligations. For that reason, philosophical reasoning and reflection are necessary.

At the same time, few philosophers seriously study how to incorporate philosophical teachings into our lives. This is a crucial omission because the available evidence indicates that the impact of philosophy is quite limited. Studying philosophy appears to have few effects on our attitudes and dispositions on average. While philosophy should guide life, it doesn't seem to. I've argued in favor of one motivated hypothesis, inspired by the work of Pierre Hadot, about how to make philosophy more relevant to life. But this hypothesis requires further investigation

and support. The more fundamental point is that we must better understand how to integrate philosophy into our lives.

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